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SUBJECT: Lack of Clarity and Increasing Polarization as Elections Approach

Summary:

1. (SBU) USAID carried out an elections assessment in September in anticipation of the upcoming 2010 presidential and congressional elections in Colombia. The main conclusions were: there is a lack of clarity surrounding the elections that has contributed to a sense of paralysis among key actors; political debate has been reduced to whether or not President Uribe will run for a third term, which has contributed to a climate of polarization within the country; there is the perception that the Uribe Administration is actively campaigning and that power has been consolidated with the executive branch to the detriment of democratic institutions; and access to free and fair voting, particularly for vulnerable populations, remains problematic. End Summary.

2. (U) The USAID Elections Assessment Team met with over 30 representatives of NGOs, the media, Congress, the business sector, academia, internally displaced persons (IDP) organizations, student groups, political parties, donors and international organizations, and several GOC entities involved in the electoral process. The assessment report will be completed by November 1, 2009.

Uncertainty & Polarization

3. (SBU) A lack of clarity on the regulatory rules governing the presidential reelection referendum and recent legislative changes governing political party affiliation have created uncertainty regarding the "rules of the game" and a sense of paralysis among key actors. For example, those surveyed generally agree that there is not enough time for the Constitutional Court to review and rule on the proposed referendum for a third term for President Uribe. Nevertheless, most believe that some kind of accommodation will be made to ensure it goes forward. Likewise, it is unclear whether and when the "Ley de Garantias," which establishes that the President must announce his candidacy six months before the elections (November 30, 2009) and limits the way public funds and media can be used, will apply given that the referendum will not have occurred.

4. (SBU) Public debate is generally viewed to have been reduced to whether or not the referendum will pass, whether or not President Uribe will run and whether individuals or entities are "pro" or "anti" Uribe. The perception among civil society groups and some media outlets is that the space for public debate is increasingly limited and this could lend itself to election-related violence.

Government in Campaign Mode

& Weakening of Institutions

¶5. (SBU) There is a general perception that President Uribe is using public forums (Consejos Comunitarios) and public funds (e.g., Accion Social programs) to conduct a campaign. At departmental and municipal levels, people believe that public officials are aligning themselves with Uribe's "U" Party to ensure they receive vital public funds and benefit from Uribe's popularity.

¶6. (SBU) There is a general perception that President Uribe has consolidated state power within the executive and that democratic institutions have either been co-opted or are at risk of being co-opted. Likewise, the strength of traditional political parties has deteriorated. Many people perceive Uribe as the State and the

only option for the future success of Colombia, particularly given rocky relations with Venezuela and Ecuador.

Illegal Armed Groups & Corruption

¶7. (SBU) There is a variance of opinion regarding the extent to which illegal armed groups will try to influence these elections. However, tactics are likely to include illegal campaign contributions, coerced voting, abstention campaigns, and targeted violence. It is believed that corruption will be a prevalent theme in these elections, particularly at municipal and departmental levels.

Access

¶8. (SBU) Access to free and fair voting, particularly for internally displaced persons (IDPs), remains problematic. There are long delays in obtaining national identification cards and, in poor communities, vulnerable populations are either threatened or offered bribes to vote for specific candidates.

Planned USG Assistance

¶9. (U) USAID will provide, through the National Democratic Institute (NDI), a sub-grant of \$100,000 to the NGO Mision de Observaci???n Electoral (MOE) to conduct observation in 12 departments on the day of congressional elections and a sub-grant of \$40,000 to Transparencia por Colombia (TPC), the national representative of Transparency International, for the development of a new version of its Clear Accounts software. This software will be used by political parties to prepare and file financial disclosure forms for the elections. Finally, USAID is supporting a campaign, through the International Republic Institute (IRI), to encourage Afro-Colombians and IDPs to participate in the elections.

¶10. (U) The Political Section is planning to organize U.S. Embassy delegations to participate in electoral observations, in conjunction with OAS and other international donors where possible. The Political Section is also closely monitoring the development of election-related reforms and the reelection referendum process, and is in constant communication with all national political parties and their candidates.

¶11. (U) The international community's "Friends of Democracy" group in Bogota plans to organize periodic meetings with the GOC and

other stakeholders to discuss elections-related issues. The Swedish Government and the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) are providing funds for MOE's operational costs. Currently, USAID is the only donor providing assistance to MOE for elections observation. However, it is expected that other international donors will step up to provide support.

¶12. (SBU) USAID is considering dedicating funding to the following activities through NDI and IRI:

- a) increase capacity of election watchdog groups, in particular to monitor campaigns and media usage;
- b) strengthen the capacity of political party poll watchers;
- c) provide funds to Congreso Visible, a Colombian watchdog organization that gathers and publicizes information about congressional candidates;
- d) increase long-term domestic observation in key regions of the country at least three months prior to elections;
- e) encourage domestic observation at all levels of the process (polling station, central tabulation, and electoral dispute processes); and
- f) increase the number of departments where domestic observation will be conducted.

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